

EDUCATION, LANGUAGE, AND CONFLICT IN MYANMAR'S ETHNIC MINORITY STATES

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Education, Language and Conflict in Myanmar's Ethnic Minority States¹

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To what extent did the democratic environment in Myanmar allow ethnic minority groups to promote their language and culture? Would decentralization help ethnic minority groups preserve them? After 2011, and particularly after the election of the NLD government in 2015, Myanmar's ethnic minority groups placed high hopes in securing new rights and powers to manage their own states, as well as preserve their culture. While their quest remained elusive for a new federal state, which underlies sixty years of civil war, they pursued short-term strategies to preserve local languages and culture. While the issue is broader and encompasses many aspects of ethnic minority livelihoods, the education system is a cornerstone of how groups can ensure generational transmission of their cultural heritage and language.

While opening up some new opportunities for ethnic language advancement, I argue that these small improvements are dwarfed by continued practices that enhance the Burmanization of ethnic minorities, and continued strength of the Bamar-dominated state. In spite of a large-scale reform of the educational curriculum, the gains made are relatively modest. The state has accepted the inclusion of some teaching of languages and culture as part of the regular school schedule. While this is an important step, it falls well short of deepening the acquisition of minority languages and culture, including their perspectives in the teaching of Myanmar's history, or allowing meaningful input into curriculum design to address specific concerns.

With the end of the National League for Democracy (NLD)'s first term, and the coup of February 2021 such questions remain crucial. The NLD government showed very little progress in its political dialogue with ethnic minority groups. The 21st c. Panglong conference gains were minimal. Instead, the state proceeded with implementing the 2008 constitution, with little indication of increasing decentralization. Education policy remained mostly national. Minor concessions were made to loosen broad restrictions in ethnic minority states. Yet, these fell short of providing ethnic minority control of language and cultural transmission. Ethnic minority grievances will not go away, whether under a new military dominated regime or eventually a renewed democratic one. Education, particularly as a vehicle for cultural and linguistic preservation, will remain key for ethnic minority groups. Decentralization of educational management as well as greater flexibility in the teaching of local languages, culture and history would likely help to alleviate some of the deep grievances.

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This article draws on data from a survey conducted in 2018, as well as interviews in Chin, Kachin, and Karen states between 2016-2020.² The survey reports on ethnic minority perceptions of the education received, particularly in terms of language of education as well as acquisition of local language and culture. The interviews were conducted in particular with groups involved in the teaching of language and culture at the local level, as well as state-level education officials.

Education and the Management of Ethnic Diversity

Education is tightly related to a group's identity and culture. The core curriculum of any educational system, particularly at the primary and secondary levels, aims at providing some basic skills but also at acquiring literacy and high functionality in one or more languages, as well as basic knowledge of history and sometimes core values. The language of education is not neutral, as it reflects a historically determined prevalence of one or several groups' ability to elevate their language to such prominent status within a state. Furthermore, choices in a curriculum include courses that teach local history. How the history and culture of a state and groups within it are taught builds a narrative about group histories. The inclusion or exclusion of minority groups in the curriculum is an obvious dimension, but also the narrative of relations among groups and their relationship to the state as well. History and culture, taught in primary and secondary schools, speaks directly to a group's identity and how it views itself in relation to other groups within a state.

While language can be viewed in some circumstances merely as a mode of communication that binds groups together (Anderson 1991), in most cases it represents a marker of ethnic identity and a core part of cultural heritage. (Smith,). The identity-making character of language is embedded within the communities that use them, and language therefore becomes an education priority for intergenerational transmission of culture (Bahry 2012). Language is closely linked to a whole set of group grievances associated with political and cultural sources of mobilization and conflict (Gurr, 2000; Jesse and Williams 2011, 43)). Marginalisation of language, among other cultural aspects, can be part of core grievances against the state.

In some cases, language is even the main cleavage associated with ethnic conflict and civil war. Bormann, Cederman and Vogt (2017), for instance, show that linguistic cleavages are more likely to lead to intra-state conflicts than other cleavages, such as religious ones. The role of language in education policy is difficult, of course, to dissociate from other ways in which control over language can alleviate ethnic conflict. As Fishman argues, there are three arenas where the choice over which language to use is politically sensitive and directly relates to group grievances: government services, mass media, and elementary education [(Fishman 1989) Fishman, Joshua A. 1989. *Language and Ethnicity in Minority Sociolinguistic Perspective*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.] It can therefore be difficult to address language use and its place in an education system, without as well analyzing its role in public services and the media, where it can also be a source of cultural recognition and preservation. Nevertheless, because education has multiple goals that are unrelated to group identity and culture, an analysis of trade-offs in education policy in ethnic minority settings can better serve to align it with the goals of reducing ethnic conflict, addressing grievances, and responding to claims of accommodation to strengthen minority group representation and power within the state.

² See *UoFT-MIPS Survey on the Delivery of Public Services in Chin, Kachin, Kayin, and Magwe, 2019*.

Institutional accommodation that devolves power and resources to sub-national units is often a key demand of ethnic minority groups and a frequent proposed solution to conflict. Language and education are important considerations when crafting such units or deciding on what kinds of fiscal or administrative powers and resources should be devolved. Proponents of “federalism” or “autonomy” often point to the stabilizing impact of devolving to local governments the power to manage the local language of instruction (Hechter 2000, 142-152). In India, linguistically demarcated states have protected state languages at the national level. This protection has been instrumental in defusing ethnic violence (Stuligross and Varshney 2002).

A centralized education sector often fails to adequately address the grievances arising from rights to identity and language (Dryden-Peterson and Mulimbi 2016). In Serbia, while laws at the national level allowed Vojvodina, the ethnically plural autonomous region in Northern Serbia, to raise minority languages to the status of official language and provide public services in the local language, a lack of adequate resources made their use largely symbolic and ineffective (Korhecz 2008). In Macedonia, an ethnic coalition ruling at the central level managed to provide accommodation for Albanian speakers with respect to language use and education (Koneska 2014). But resources fell short for local schools to provide mother-tongue based education. Furthermore, the law provided minority language rights solely to municipalities where Albanians represented 20% or more of the population, and some even refused to implement the law (Duncan 2016, 466). Without adequately devolving both power and resources to sub-national units, it can be difficult to enhance the status of minority languages and their use in the education system.

A decentralized approach to education is a better policy option to manage and mitigate the risks of conflict arising from ethnic disparities in levels or access to education ethnic groups. Brown (2011) argues that granting greater autonomy over fiscal management and political decentralization in tandem to decentralization in education policies pose as an effective model to mitigate the impact of education disparities in causing further conflict in ethnically divided communities. Doing so not only allows for a more efficient matching of state resources and local priorities for education, but it also leads to greater impact on improving the performance of students in previously marginalized areas (Faguet and Sanchez 2008; Channa and Faguet 2016). Without adequate provision of fiscal and human resources to make it work, however, a decentralised approach to language education may lead to inequality in the quality of education and therefore fail to meet the goals that such a policy approach hopes to achieve. (Urbanović and Patapas 2012; Şen and Bandyopadhyay 2010).

While there are trade-offs in adopting more centralized or decentralized educational systems in multiethnic societies, the objective of recognizing ethnic minority identities and providing tools to preserve and enhance their language and culture is probably, on balance, better met through more decentralized approaches. Where issues of identity recognition and language use are contested, an emphasis on minority languages in education policy helps to reduce conflict (Lall and South 2018; Wong 2019).

Education policy and ethnic cultural politics in Myanmar

Education, language and culture are core areas of demands and grievances among ethnic minority groups. They are key to the transmission of culture and the preservation of languages that reproduce ethnic communities. As elsewhere, these issues are the source of deep grievances

in Myanmar, and core to demands in the context of a future federal state. While at basic level, the preservation and enhancement of ethnic languages is key, the way in which they are taught and how they are integrated to the education system determines how they can be maintained. More broadly, as basic education also shapes history, norms, and values it becomes a deeply contested not only for cultural preservation but also to shape identity and adapt education to local conditions and needs.

During the Ne Win regime, socialist education and alignment with the regime's ideology were the priorities. While the education system was centralized and rigid in its content, the regime was relatively lax in its approach to ethnic languages. As Mary Callahan has argued, both the preceding democratic and Ne Win's socialist regimes were preoccupied with consolidating the Union and establishing centralizing policies to solidify the state, particularly in core areas. This included establishing Bamar as the official language and implementing homogenous institutions and rules across Myanmar. Notably, the Ne Win regime passed regulations to use only Burmese as the language of instruction in all school subjects. (Lall and South 2014, p.308) However, in practice, they remained less concerned with ethnic minority areas that were mostly remote. While ethnic groups perceived the policies as a threat to their identities, and largely fueled the numerous insurgencies, they still had the space to use and teach their languages relatively undisturbed. (Callahan) Indeed, the Ne Win regime declared that the ethnic minorities in Burma had the right to pursue and maintain its language and literature during the Union Day in 1964 (Cameron 1992, p.153). The Ne Win regime even allowed education of Kachin, Karen, Kayah, Chin and Shan literature to ethnic minority students within the Academy for the Development of National Groups, which was established to provide skilled human resources to the ethnic states of Burma that were loyal to the Ne Win regime (Cameron 1992, p.155-156).

Under the military regime, and into the USDP's transitional administration, ethnic minorities resented "Burmanizing" policies. In spite of recognizing "national races" in the previous Constitution, and preserving ethnic states, the former military junta actually increased assimilation policies. The military junta under the SLORC and SPDC tightened the rules, increased policies to make Burmese the only language used in schools, alongside a curriculum that only minimally mentioned ethnic minority groups while reifying the primacy of the Bamar and its historical roots in past kingdoms that ruled over the existing territory.³ The military junta heavily emphasized the histories of Bamar dynasties since 1988 in Myanmar's history curricular, as periods of unity and prosperity (Salem-Gervais and Metro, 2012). While doing so, the curricula minimized the discussion of the histories of non-Bamar ethnic groups in Myanmar. For example, periods where competing political powers in the peripheries of Myanmar's current territory were removed from history textbooks during the military rule to push for the narrative of unity under the Bamar dynasties (Salem-Gervais and Metro 2012, p.50). In some places, such as Chin state, where young kids were unable to speak Burmese, they were at a significant disadvantage in school.⁴ In addition, the Ministry of Border Affairs have run Border Areas National Races Youth Development Training Schools, locally known as Na Ta La schools, since

³ Mary P. Callahan, "Making Myanmar: Language, Territory, and Belonging in Post-Socialist Burma." Joel S. Migdal (ed.) *Boundaries and Belonging: States and Societies in the Struggle to Shape Identities and Local Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 99-120.

⁴ Interview with staff members from Chin women's issues organization, Hakha, February 2019

1994. Na Ta La schools were used to coerce Chin youth into conversion to Buddhism, functioning as a site of forced Burmanization of non-Bamar communities (CHRO 2012, p. 13)

Of course, language and local education were taught in zones controlled by armed groups. The MNSP organized a large network of schools where Mon language and culture were taught. Establishing its first school in 1972-73, the MNSP maintained nearly one hundred primary schools, several middle schools and a high school (South 2003, p.193). In these schools, Mon language was used as the primary language of instruction at the primary level, and for history in middle school level (South 2003, p.193). Mon students could obtain education in their local language until grade 10, after which they were able to go to University in other parts of Myanmar after the ceasefire.⁵

In the Karen state, under the areas controlled by the KNU, there were textbooks available in Zagaw Karen and Po Karen, up to 10th and 8th grade respectively.⁶ The KNU have established schools within its controlled territories since the 1950s, establishing its own education department in the 1970s (Lall and South 2014, p.307).

While education was highly centralized and homogenized across the country, there was still some tolerance toward the teaching of ethnic languages and culture outside of the classroom, particularly in the later years of the military regime even government controlled areas. In Mon state, after the ceasefire in 1995, there was an agreement that students could take the 10th grade education exam in the Mon language.⁷ But in 1998, the government closed down 120 Mon schools. When it allowed their reopening after negotiations with the NMSP, it refused to allow Mon language and culture to be taught (Callahan, p.). In most other regions, languages could only be taught through churches or other religious organizations, without formal authorization.⁸ In Chin state, churches would teach languages during summer camps.⁹ In Kachin state, summer camps were also the main channel to teach jingpao. But since children also took private lessons to improve their chances of passing matriculation exams in the Union system, many children chose not to attend the language camps.¹⁰

Changes in education and cultural policy since 2011

After 2011, the civilian government began to make changes to education policy. Yet, the 2008 constitution reaffirmed that education falls under the jurisdiction of the central government. Article 28 tasked the Union government with implementing “a modern education system that will promote all-around correct thinking and a good moral character contributing towards the building of the Nation.” And while it recognizes its responsibility to “develop language, literature, fine arts and culture of the National races” in Article 22, the responsibility remains with the Union government. At the state level, the social affairs minister was given the power to

⁵ Interview with staff member from Mon civil society organization, Yangon, June 2015

⁶ Interview with a civil society activist working in Bago, Yangon, June 2015

⁷ Interview with staff member from Mon civil society organization, Yangon, June 2015

⁸ Interview with member from the Karen political party, June 2015

⁹ Interview with a religious leader in Chin State, Hakha, February 2019

¹⁰ Focus group with the members of the Kachin civil society, June 2015

oversee and coordinate some of the issues that might arise but without actual power over the management of schools, teachers, or any involvement in curricular matters. The central government has therefore retained the discretion of deciding the extent to which the curriculum can be accommodated to local circumstances, ethnic languages can be taught, and cultural content can reflect the uniqueness of each ethnic community.

Over the course of the years of reform, the central government has increasingly extended greater concessions on language and culture, while reaffirming the primacy of its centralized control over education. By doing so, it has institutionalized a new set of practices and norms regarding the teaching of ethnic languages and culture.

In June, 2012, the Ministry of Education took significant steps toward implementing a new approach to ethnic languages and culture. It allowed the teaching of ethnic languages and literatures in elementary school (up to Grade 3).¹¹ Several ethnic regions had positive responses to this change. Among the Karen, outside of KNU areas, both Zgaw and Po-Karen were taught, from kindergarten to 2nd grade, but only before or after school hours.¹² In Chin state teaching could occur as well but outside of school hours.¹³ In 2010, the government allowed ethnic language literature and then by 2013 it allowed the teaching of Chin languages as part of extra-curricular activities in government schools.¹⁴ In Kachin, teachers were allowed to teach language in low grades starting in 2015.¹⁵ The ministry also formed a taskforce to translate and compile school textbooks for larger minority ethnic groups. These new measures represented a major break from the previous military regime that recognized only Myanmar as the official language and the only medium of exchange in government offices, schools, media and courts.¹⁶

But there were strong limitations. First, the teaching of ethnic languages was mostly allowed after school hours. Second, new textbooks had to be produced that aligned with government expectations. The Karen Baptist Theological Seminary had experts producing textbooks even before 2010. But a committee had to be struck to produce new textbooks for primary grades as the government considered the Baptist Seminary's textbooks to be too religious, while the KNU's were too nationalist.¹⁷ In Chin state, there were some objections to the publication of textbooks for kindergarten pupils on the basis that they might be too religious.¹⁸ In Kachin state, the cultural and literature committees could not be involved in teaching jingpao after the ceasefire ended in 2011. They were subject to monitoring to ensure that they did not do so.¹⁹

The approach was reaffirmed in a vast curriculum renewal that the USDP government initiated. After a comprehensive review of the educational sector, the government adopted in

¹¹ UNICEF has worked with government, civil societal organizations, and non-state armed groups to promote "mother tongue" education throughout the country. Interview with staff from UNICEF and Pyoe Pin International, Yangon, July 2015.

¹² Interview with member from the Karen political party, June 2015

¹³ Interview with Chin civil society activist, Hakha, February 2019

¹⁴ Interview with a religious leader in Chin State, Hakha, February 2019

¹⁵ Focus group with the members of the Kachin civil society, June 2015

¹⁶ Interview with two staffs from Pyoe Pin International, Yangon, January 2014, 2015, and Interview with Karen civil society groups working on Karen language and literature, Yangon, January 2014.

¹⁷ Interview with member from the Karen political party, June 2015

¹⁸ Interview with a religious leader in Chin State, Hakha, February 2019

¹⁹ Interview with staff member from Kachin education sector NGO, Myitkyina, February 2018

2014 a new National Education Law. The NLD government subsequently upheld the reform law and began its implementation. The law acknowledges the role of informal, non-state and private education, which often plays a complementary role to the formal education system and has been the main vehicle for teaching ethnic minorities language. It also began to include some aspects in the formal education system. It permitted in primary education the use of ethnic languages along with Burmese, if necessary.²⁰ It reaffirmed in law the ability to teach languages in early years of primary school, as had been announced earlier. Finally later revisions went even further by beginning to transfer some authority to state and regional governments. Article 39 G of the National Education Amendments (June 25, 2015) gave state and regional governments the responsibility to develop the local content of the education curriculum.

These changes were evident in many ethnic minority states. In Chin state, the permission to teach Chin languages and develop local curriculum were already in place. By 2019, the Chin Association of Christian Communities (CACC) in Hakha had already developed textbooks in local Chin dialect up to grade 5, with plans to develop materials for teaching culture and language to grade 12. In Falam, the Baptist Union was similarly involved in preparing textbooks, while in the rest of Chin state the responsibility fell on local literature and cultural societies.²¹ There were even plans to develop a local curriculum for history and geography.²²

While the curriculum changes were developed and expanded, there were also some slight changes in the management of education. Some of the changes that the NLD introduced had a clear impact. An increase in budget allowed teachers to be paid better, and they were provided with travelling costs. Previously, one of the issues was that teachers were assigned to Chin state, but tended to stay in Hakha. They would often not show up in school. The government began to cover travel costs in order to provide teachers with the support needed to get to their schools. The township level officers also took direct responsibility to perform quarterly monitoring and reporting.²³

In terms of the planning and decisions in education, a certain amount of decentralization has occurred, but mostly as deconcentration of central government authority.²⁴ The authority to promote and transfer different levels of staff in education is now deconcentrated to districts (for middle and high school heads and township education officers), and townships (for primary and middle school teachers).²⁵ Township education officers can participate in planning, budgeting,

²⁰ See Pyidaungsu Hluttaw Law No. 38/2015 - Law Amending the National Education Law (Burmese), <http://www.myanmar-law-library.org/law-library/laws-and-regulations/laws/myanmar-laws-1988-until-now/union-solidarity-and-development-party-laws-2012-2016/myanmar-laws-2015/pyidaungsu-hluttaw-law-no-38-2015-law-amending-the-national-education-law.html>

²¹ Interview with a religious leader in Chin State, Hakha, February 2019

²² Interview with staff member from the Chin State private education sector, Hakha, February 2019

²³ Interview with a religious leader in Chin State, Hakha, February 2019; Interview with a staff member from the Chin State Department of Education, Hakha, February 2019

²⁴ Deconcentration is the weakest form of decentralization, by which central government ministries delegate some implementing powers and some autonomy to lower levels of bureaucracy of the line ministry offices at the regional level. Aaron Schneider, "Decentralization: Conceptualization and measurement." *Studies in comparative international development* 38.3 (2003): 32-56.

²⁵ Nixon, Hamish, Cindy Joelene, Thet Aung Lynn, Kyi Pyar Chit Saw and Matthew Arnold. 2013. *State and Region Governments in Myanmar*. Yangon: The Asia Foundation and Myanmar Development

and identifying the priorities and needs of their schools, which have received increased financial, technological, and technical support from the central government. To a very limited degree, this measure allows for some adaptation to local contexts, including ethnic minority areas. But overall these decisions remain within the line ministry of the central government, and does not provide for much input from the state governments. While in some cases the state Minister of Social Affairs plays an active role and is consulted on some of the important decisions, actual power continues to reside with the central government and therefore the actual practice of decentralized decision-making varies tremendously from one ethnic state to another, and even with the competence and personal leadership of Chief ministers and Social Affairs ministers.

Despite these changes, the reality of implementing the new curriculum or teaching languages in ethnic minority areas shows important limitations. The teaching of mother tongues has remained difficult for most ethnic minority groups.²⁶ Minorities that are Christian, such as Kachin and Christian Karen, have had more success protecting their language, since the Church has provided a ready-made infrastructure with some resources. They regularly taught languages in after school or weekend programs. When the government became more tolerant of their role, they became increasingly open. Since the adoption of the new educational law, some have been involved in local committees working on local language textbooks to integrate in primary school. Buddhist monasteries in Buddhist areas, such as the Rakhine, Mon, and Shan, offer similar services but they were decentralized and depended on individual monks. The lack of resources has been a strong impediment to the teaching of ethnic languages outside of the school system, and has therefore relied mostly on volunteers and established religious organizations.²⁷ Furthermore, up until the slow implementation of educational reforms in 2019, ethnic languages continued to be taught mostly in after school programs, which has made the school day longer and has sometimes been a disincentive for pupils to attend.²⁸

Our survey, conducted in [...2019] showed significant barriers to education due to the difficulty of understanding local teachers. Table 1 shows that a high number of respondents (35.88%) in Chin state expressed difficulties in their education due to the inability to understand their teachers, who would be required to use the dominant language, Bamar, in the classroom. While much less high, there is nevertheless some degree of similar trends among the Kachin (7.18%) and Karen (9.71%) respectively, certainly in comparison to respondents in Magwe (2.18), which is an overwhelmingly Bamar region and a control case in our study. Table 2 showed similar responses according to ethnicity, with minor discrepancies reflecting the presence of some Bamar respondents in ethnic states. These show that in Chin state in particular, which has several remote areas, the degree of penetration of Bamar in everyday use was limited due to its geographical remoteness. Past policies of Burmanization appeared to have led to strong

Research Institute – Centre for Economic and Social Development, Policy Dialogue Brief Series no. 1, September 2013, p. 5.

²⁶ 12 out of 22 participants who attended our June 2015 workshop in Yangon said that they have not seen the teaching of minority languages at school in their areas, 3 said the teaching of minority languages “have been offered at government primary schools but outside school hours” and one said the teaching of minority languages have been offered “not at government schools at non-government organizations.”

²⁷ Interview with a Mon civil society activist, Yangon, 18 June 2015.

²⁸ Interviews with Mon, Karen, Chin civil society activists, Yangon, 18 June 2015; Comments made by participants from Karen areas in Bago Region, Workshop in Bago, June 2015.

trends of learning Bamar even at a pre-school age, therefore showing little barrier upon entry to primary school for Kachin and Karen children, although 7-9% of those left behind is not negligible.

By contrast, even though children might not have experienced barriers to understanding their teachers, there is nevertheless a very high desire to learn and use local languages in school. In table 3, respondents were asked how much they valued the teaching of their language and culture in school. While there are some puzzling differences among groups, nevertheless over 80% among all groups, including the Bamar, expressed a desire to include these elements to the curriculum, and across ethnic minorities did so with at higher levels than among the Bamar. Table 4 shows that the Chin (79%), Kachin (71%) and Karen (87%) all expressed a high desire to learn their mother tongue in school, although they fell below the 92% of Bamar. There is certainly therefore a gap between the strong expression of the need to include the teaching of local language and culture in ethnic minority schools, and the incremental changes that were introduced during the NLD government's mandate.

The broader curriculum and its delivery continue to reflect the dominance of the Bamar majority. While the situation varies from one ethnic state to the other, most textbooks used are written in Burmese and contain material that ignores the social and cultural realities of ethnic regions.²⁹ Most teachers are still sent by the central government, speak Burmese and are of Bamar origin.³⁰ As a result, ethnic minority groups often reject the textbooks and are resentful at the lack of sensitivity to local needs and realities.³¹

Furthermore, the management of education more broadly has perpetuated centralization, which significantly hinders the ability to tailor to the specific needs of local minorities and address the specific kinds of challenges that they face. Budgets continue to be centralized and controlled by the central office of the Ministry of Education in Nay Pi Taw. In recent years, there have been more responsibilities that have been deconcentrated to the township level, but much depends on decisions made centrally. In Chin state, local officials could request for new schools to be built, assess local needs and establish some priorities. These requests are then submitted to NPT, and can be pursued once they received budgets and permission from the central office. The hiring of teachers is also done at the township level, but depends again on final approval from NPT.³²

In particular, Chin state has had enormous problems relative to other states and regions in terms of the availability of teachers, their quality, as well as drop-out rates. Between 2013-15, new teachers were appointed on a daily pay, for a period of one year, after which they would be paid monthly. Almost all were from Sagaing and Magway, and they tended to leave after their

²⁹ Interview with Chin, Karen, Naga civil society actors, Yangon, Mandalay (January 2015, 18 June 2015, February 2016). Observation of participants, Workshop, Yangon, June 2015.

³⁰ Interview with Shan civil society actor, Yangon, 18 June 2015; a Karen civil society actor, Yangon 18 June 2015; members of Pa'O political party and civil societal organizations, Shan State, June 2017.

³¹ Interview with Karen civil society actor, Yangon, 18 June 2015. Comments made by participants who attended panels on education and languages in minority ethnic areas at International Conference on Language Policy in Multicultural and Multilingual Settings, Mandalay, February 8-11, 2016.

³² Interview with staff member from the Chin State Department of Education, Hakha, February 2019; Interview with a staff member from the Chin State Department of Education, Hakha, February 2019

initial first year was completed. They would then be replaced with teachers that, once again, lacked experience.³³ In recent years, the problem of lack of teachers has persisted. There are few Chin graduates who can fill the positions so even though they were prioritizing Chin teachers, they simply could not find sufficient numbers. Those coming from outside viewed Chin state as a hardship posting. Even with a hardship allowance, the salary was considered low.³⁴ One official estimated that ... once they get their one year and have experience, they leave. So get replaced again with teachers with no experience. Not enough Chin graduates to fill in the positions.

The broader system of managing teacher employment and promotion exacerbates problems in ethnic minority states as primary education is the core of building up basic skills that include local language and culture. The system places very low reward on primary education and, instead, creates incentives for experienced teachers to move away. Teachers in middle and high school are better paid and have better conditions. As a result, as soon as teachers gain sufficient experience at the primary level, they tend to seek transfers to middle and high schools.³⁵ The primary level tends to lose its teachers and are always in need of replacement.

Furthermore, the centralization of educational management makes it difficult to address regional specific problems. Chin state, for instance, has an unusually high drop out rate, and the homogenous approach in the educational system exacerbates the problem. Many children tend to quit school in grade 7 or 8, and migrate to neighboring Mizoram or to Malaysia in search of job opportunities. Since they have little education, and no employment opportunities in Chin state, they become highly vulnerable migrants. Those who continue tend to have relatively high rates of failure and economic barriers to obtaining their degrees. In 2018, only 12% passed grade 11 in all of Chin state. Of the vast majority who fail, only 30-40% can afford to attend the matriculation (grade 11) exams again.³⁶ The cost of the matriculation exam is approximately 1,000,000kyat, and few can afford to take it a second time. This leads to a large number of disaffected youth who fail to obtain their high school degrees, and whose future opportunities are therefore greatly reduced.³⁷

For large ethnic groups that have managed their own educational system, the problem becomes mostly the question of ensuring that their students can obtain higher education or how their educational system can either be recognized or better integrated to the Myanmar educational system more broadly. The Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) has long boarding schools in its area of control, particularly around Laiza and Mai Ja Yang.³⁸ The KIO began establishing schools in 1964, founding the KIO Education Department in 1976 (Jolliffe 2014 (Asia Foundation), p. 15). Between 1994 and 2011, when the KIO had a ceasefire with the Myanmar state, the KIO schools ironically provided education in Jingpaw language but followed the government curriculum. At the time, their students could then pass the matriculation exams

³³ Interview with a staff member from the Chin State Department of Education, Hakha, February 2019

³⁴ Interview with staff member from the international organization, Hakha, Chin State, February 2019

³⁵ Interview with staff member from the international organization, Hakha, Chin State, February 2019

³⁶ Interview with a religious leader in Chin State, Hakha, February 2019

³⁷ Interview with a religious leader in Chin State, Hakha, February 2019

³⁸ Interview with Kachin women's issues organization, Myitkyina, February 2019

and be admitted to universities elsewhere in Myanmar. This became impossible after the cease-fire broke down in 2011.³⁹

The KIO continued to develop its parallel education system and took new measures to compensate for the loss of relations with the Ministry. By 2013, the KIO provided education to over 23,000 students, running 243 primary schools, 32 middle schools, and 4 high schools in areas under its control (Jolliffe 2014 (Asia Foundation), p. 15). It established the Mai Ja Yang Institute of Education that trains new teachers that could be deployed in KIO areas in 2014 (Kachinland News 2015).⁴⁰ Mai Ja Yang National College also offers degree programs in subjects such as computer sciences, business management, nursing and law in Jinghpaw, Chinese and English to provide a suitable alternative to government-run higher education outside of KIO controlled areas in Myanmar (Jangma (Radio Free Asia) 2020). The KIO also expanded networks of primary and middle schools, while opening a few private high schools inside Myitkyina (Kachin National Education Design; Kachin National School). Teachers in the KIO system receive similar salaries as the soldiers in the KIA.⁴¹ They continued to use the same textbooks as the Union government, as they lacked the capacity to develop an alternative curriculum. But they have also added Kachin nationalist education as well as English.⁴² It was generally considered that the quality of some key subjects, such as math, biology, and physics were not as good as in government-run schools, so it impeded on the ability of students to pass matriculation exams of the Union government, even when allowed.⁴³

In Mon state, the cease-fire has allowed to establish more formal relations with the government-run system but created new problems. The NMSP had long run its own schools and preserved its extensive network after the cease-fire. After the cease-fire, the government tried to convert some of the NMSP schools in the government areas into official government schools. But, as a result, many of the students that began to attend those schools no longer received education in Mon language. In contrast, Mon National schools have continued to provide Mon-language based curriculum, including Mon history and language lesson up to secondary school level, in 137 schools across MNSP and government controlled territories (Jolliffe (Asia Foundation) 2014, 5). Unlike government-run schools, where language of instruction is in Burmese, Mon National schools provide a mother-tongue based multilingual curriculum, where a child is instructed in his or her first language (Nyein Nyein and Zue Zue (Irrawaddy) 2019). Mon curriculum is used at the primary level, transitioning to government curriculum in post-primary level (ibid.). Over time, as in other areas, they were allowed to teach Mon but it was only gradually introduced at the primary level, yet the NMSP already had a full curriculum in Mon language that was ignored. So even though the introduction of Mon into government schools was an improvement, it was a setback from the perspective on past teaching on Mon language and curriculum.⁴⁴

³⁹ Interview with the member of the Kachin Independence Organization, Myitkyina, February 2019;
Interview with Kachin civil society activist, February 2019

⁴⁰ Interview with the member of the Kachin Independence Organization, Myitkyina, February 2019

⁴¹ Interview with the member of the Kachin Independence Organization, Myitkyina, February 2019

⁴² Interview with the staff in the Kachin State Ministry of Education, Myitkyina, February 2019

⁴³ Interview with the staff in the Kachin State Ministry of Education, Myitkyina, February 2019

⁴⁴ Interview with staff member from Mon civil society organization, Yangon, June 2015

Conclusion

Since the transition in 2011, there has been much discussion about negotiating a new political dialogue with ethnic minority groups. The Thein Sein government signed cease fire agreements that led to the Union Peace Conference, and the NLD government continued discussion under the 21st century Panlong conference. During this time, the Union government implemented the 2008 constitution, spoke of intentions to create a new federal state, while international organizations and foreign governments praised what was perceived as greater trends toward decentralization.

In this paper, I have argued that the very small changes in the area of education, language and culture show the reluctance of the Union government to offer genuine advancement in the promotion and preservation of ethnic languages and culture, and of addressing some of the perceived threats from ethnic minority groups from centralization. At a very narrow level of teaching ethnic minority languages in primary and secondary school, it took almost a decade for the government to begin allowing the teaching of these languages during school hours. The move away from the more assimilationist policies of the military regime merely allowed the teaching of languages in after-school hours. The NLD government began to relax this restriction but there have been numerous obstacles to its implementation. It has taken some time for textbooks to be available, particularly since previous versions that were developed by religious organizations or armed groups were seen as potentially tainted.

At a broader level, the Constitution of 2008 and its implementation clearly perpetuate the highly centralized nature of the education system. The NLD began to implement a new curriculum that has allowed the inclusion of some local content, but by 2020 ethnic states had actually developed not much more than some basic textbooks for teaching local language and culture up to grade 3. It is clear that the broad unveiling of the new education curriculum and the changes to the structure of program delivery from kindergarten to high school were highly positive in terms of delivering potentially stronger skills in basic knowledge across a variety of disciplines. But the lack of involvement of ethnic minority groups in the curricular reforms perpetuated the practice of the Union government making unilateral decisions on what constitutes the basic level of knowledge, as well as 'moral norms' and 'values' that the curriculum would deliver in service of national objectives.

Centralized decision-making and planning also creates further problems for adequate delivery of education in ethnic minority states. Several states, such as Chin, have suffered from insufficient teachers, poor infrastructure, and social conditions that have led to higher drop-out rates in these regions. Since many of the incentives and decisions regarding staffing are made outside of ethnic minority states, the level of bureaucratic awareness and sensitivity to the issues is relatively low. Similarly, the centralized budgeting system hampers the ability to reallocate resources to address specific problems at the state level. The Constitution of 2008 gives the social affairs minister and Chief Ministers some coordinating role, but few powers to address problems. When individuals have been particularly resourceful, they have been able to raise awareness and secure some budgetary allocations to address some of the locally specific problems, but these are rare and relatively ad hoc.

If Myanmar is to continue political dialogue with ethnic minorities, it is clear that a core service such as education should become part of the discussion. Yet, the Constitution of 2008,

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the established educational infrastructure, and the new curriculum reform all point to the unquestioned perpetuation of a highly centralized education system. Furthermore, as seen in cease-fire areas, there is basically little to no discussion of the process by which schools previously controlled by ethnic armed groups are transitioned to the national education system. The Karen, Kachin, and Mon all had different levels of development of local curriculum, as well as course-content that aligned with Myanmar's education system, but the expansion of government schools in grey zones and the integration of ethnic minority schools has basically been done on terms established by the Union government, with little regard to local complaints or concerns. Recent trends in the education system are illustrative of the immense challenges ethnic minority groups face in negotiating a new status and new sets of power and resources to manage their affairs and address specific problems in a future so-called 'federal' state.

TABLES

Table 1

There is difficulty to access the education because not understand the language teachers (by state/region)				
	Chin	Kachin	Kayin	Magwe
A little	26.51%	6.76%	5.57%	2.02%
Don't know/No answer	1.30%	1.13%	2.71%	0.93%
Not at all	62.82%	91.69%	87.57%	96.89%
Somewhat	6.63%	0.28%	1.00%	0.16%
Very much	2.74%	0.14%	3.14%	0.00%
Sum of expressed dissatisfaction	35.88%	7.18%	9.71%	2.18%
Magwe, +/-	33.70%	5.01%	7.54%	0.00%

Table 2

There is difficulty to access the education because not understand the language teachers (by ethnicity)				
	Chin	Kachin	Kayin	Bamar
A little	25.03%	6.98%	7.05%	2.70%
Don't know/No answer	1.26%	1.40%	2.41%	1.46%
Not at all	65.17%	91.06%	88.13%	93.48%
Somewhat	6.43%	0.56%	1.30%	2.36%
Very much	2.10%	0.00%	1.11%	0.00%
Sum of expressed dissatisfaction	33.57%	7.54%	9.46%	5.06%
Bamar, +/-	28.50%	2.48%	4.40%	0.00%

Table 3

Learning about own ethnicity and language is a priority for respondent				
	Chin	Kachin	Kayin	Bamar
Don't know/No Answer	2.38%	4.47%	6.12%	7.09%
Not at all;	11.19%	11.45%	8.35%	12.37%
Some;	51.05%	70.95%	46.01%	19.91%
A lot;	35.38%	13.13%	39.52%	60.63%
Difference w/ Bamar (Some + a lot)	5.89%	3.54%	4.99%	0.00%

Table 4

Respondent want/have wanted to learn his/her mother tongue in your school or not				
	Chin	Kachin	Kayin	Bamar
Don't Know	1.40%	2.79%	1.48%	4.61%
No	19.58%	25.98%	11.50%	2.92%
Yes	79.02%	71.23%	87.01%	92.46%
Difference w/ Bamar	-13.44%	-21.23%	-5.45%	0.00%